# [On the Waterfront. The Making of a Great American Film](http://onthewaterfrontthefilm.blogspot.com/)

## Cinematographer Boris Kaufman’s vision of On the Waterfront

On the Waterfront, director Elia Kazan’s 1954 masterpiece about corruption on the New York’s waterfront was the finest film that was almost never made. The film was haunted by controversy from the very beginning. In the early 1950s, the true-life dramatic events on the New York docks including violent wildcat labor strikes and mob violence had caught the attention of hundreds of writers who saw it as an exceptional story in the making.   
  
Over the next five years, the waterfront saga would spur the creation of at least three major screenplays, one novel, four nonfiction books, and four local, state and federal investigations. Among those watching was Kazan’s close friend, confidant, and sometime business partner, playwright Arthur Miller, who was at the pinnacle of his career.   
  
In early 1950, Miller approached Kazan with the idea of filming a treatment he had written called The Hook, which followed a loner named Marty, a longshoreman who battles the mob’s control of the docks. Miller had taken the idea for The Hook from the 1947 murder of waterfront labor activist Peter Panto.   
  
A film-ready story or not, as far as the Hollywood studios bosses were concerned, the events on the waterfront happened at the wrong time in history. The cold war mind set had gripped the nation and Hollywood was high on the suspects list of those who saw the film community as holding a lenient view of the communist menace. A story about unionism, a subject tinged with leftist themes, had no place in the film industry in the early 1950s. There was something else wrong with the waterfront story; it was not glamorous. It was the direct opposite of glamorous. It was dreary, miserable and blue collar, a subject group that the Hollywood of the late 1940s and early 1950s had never warmed too.   
  
First words leaked out that Kazan intended to hire a communist screenwriter, Walter Bernstein to pen the script and hire communist actor, John Garfield for the lead. Both Garfield and Bernstein had refused to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) looking into communist influence in American films and both were blacklisted within the year. It was something Kazan should have considered since Miller was not far from being blacklisted himself.   
  
So Miller wrote the script. When Fox Studios President Darryl Zanuck read it, he recoiled. Perhaps as a means to stay out of the project while not angering two of the most creative men in the business, Zanuck turned the script over to the FBI for review. As he expected, the Bureau suggested that he pass on the script because it might ferment unrest on the docks and hamper the war effort in Korea.   
  
Cohen went with the concept of the film but not with the left leaning Miller, who was eventually pushed out of the production. In the meantime, Kazan and the films screenwriter, Budd Schulberg appeared before the HUAC and named names. Frank Sinatra, a native of Hoboken, New Jersey, was offered the films lead and then had it withdrawn. Sinatra sued. Roy Brewer of the powerful International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees, resentful of the films portrayal of unionism, put his fingers in the celluloid pie and director Robert Siodmak sued for plagiarism.   
  
By June of 1953, everything was finally in place to begin production including the site location to film the picture, Hoboken New Jersey. Kazan’s request for location shooting, it was actually a demand, did not sit right with Columbia’s dictatorial boss Harry Cohn, who thought it better to make the film on Columbia’s back lot in California where weather, pedestrian traffic and use of local talent would not slow down the film’s production.   
  
Kazan held out on his demand, because he believed the atmosphere in Southern California was detrimental to the films theme and he was determined to make “An east coast movie.” That is, a film that would be shot entirely on the east coast as opposed to the back lots of Los Angeles, and developed with transparencies, that is, imposing a film shot of an actual location as a background for the actors. Waterfront, Kazan, said, would use the actual locations and eventually, if reluctantly, Cohn agreed.   
  
However, he wanted the entire shoot completed in 30 days. Sam Spiegel, the films producer, whose money was on the line, was completely behind the time rush demands. With his pushing and prodding the film, shooting was completed in 37 days.   
  
Eventually Kazan chose Hoboken, New Jersey as the scene for On the Waterfront, but Hoboken was the second location shoot choice. Kazan and the films scriptwriter Budd Schulberg had done all of their research in New York’s West Side, in the areas of Hell’s Kitchen and Chelsea but they passed on the New York locations due to the high expense, the traffic and the Mafia, which was clearly upset with the concept of the film. Instead, they looked across the river and saw Hoboken.   
  
By the mid 1930's and despite the film’s depiction of the city as an Irish enclave, Hoboken's largest ethnic group was Italian. The city itself was a rough, grimy seaport town, dangerous in some places, a closed community that did not welcome outsiders and the Waterfront film crew was no exception. “It was,” said a former resident “ten minutes from Manhattan and filled with people who never went there.” Only one square mile in size, Hoboken became a living part of the film and no amount of careful art direction could have resulted in the set Hoboken gave Kazan with its view of Manhattan, its seedy smoke filled crowded bars, the dank cramped apartments where the dockworkers lived and the inner cargo holds.   
  
The film’s Cinematographer would be the talented, highly respected and legendary Boris Kaufman whom Kazan hired on the recommendation of the prolific filmmaker Willard Van Dyke who had worked with Kaufman on three films in the mid 1940s. Almost five decades later, the film’s writer, Budd Schulberg still sings the cinematographers praises "Boris” Schulberg said, “Was a great artist. He did a beautiful job under difficult conditions. The weather was cold and overcast. We rushed to shoot the film in 35 days. Cheap is fast. Every day costs money. Spiegel, the producer, was on Kazan's tail to go faster. We were pleased by the way, the film turned out. Everybody was against it. We overcame all the obstacles.”   
  
Like Kazan, Kaufman strongly believed that image and theme in a film must be united and his belief is displayed in the visual continuity from scene to scene, all of it flawless, which was the cinematographer’s primary concern. Since Kazan shot Waterfront in story sequence, (Shooting each scene as the viewer would see it) continuity became a lesser issue for Kaufman, freeing him to concentrate on constancy in lighting, an ongoing problem in outside, winter shooting so to get evenly defused lighting, Kaufman had the crew burn trashcans with dried wood which creates less smoke.   
  
Throughout each of the three parts of the film, Kazan and Kaufman used camera angles that emphasized entrapment, solidified by the setting of laundry hanging on lines, which form diagonals that intrude on human space, alleyways with blinding lights and diffused lighting that emphasizes moral confusion. The results would be spectacular.   
  
Kaufman was born in 1897 in what had been a part of the Russian Empire, now Poland, in Bialystock, but eventually moved to Moscow, fleeing the endless pogroms that plagued Poland’s Jews. The Kaufman Brothers...David (professionally known as Dziga Vertov) Mikhail and Boris remain the most talented family in cinematic history. Each of them would take up film in their own way, Dziga as a director, with Mikhail as his cinematographer in Russia. Together, their jointly made film, Man with a Movie Camera (1929) is considered one of the most innovative and influential movies of the silent era. Vertov was known for his daring, experimental camera techniques, including rapid editing and playing film footage backward.   
  
In 1927, Boris immigrated to France where he became the sole cinematographer on all of director Jean Vigo's films. After service in the French Army at the beginning of World War II, Kaufman settled in the U.S. By the time he worked on Waterfront, Kaufman had crafted Garden of Eden (1954). He would later work on some of the best films of the Twentieth Century including The Brotherhood (1968) Bye Bye Braverman (1968), The Group, (1966), Long Day's Journey Into Night (1962), Splendor in the Grass (1961), 12 Angry Men (with Lee J. Cobb, 1957), Baby Doll (Another Kazan creation), and Singing in the Dark (1956).   
  
In 1965, Kaufman and Sidney Lumet would later create The Pawnbroker starring Rod Stieger. Photographed in black-and-white, it told the stark journey through the mind of a concentration camp survivor living in Harlem. Kaufman considered the production his finest work .   
  
Kaufman’s camera work is one of the key elements to Waterfront’s success. While Hoboken New Jersey gave director Elia Kazan the setting he needed, drab and worn, his primary concern was to make an exciting, successful commercial feature film. The fact that it showed the deplorable working conditions for the long shore workers and allowed mainstream America and eventually the world to better understand cultural and class differences, is an admirable by-product of the production. While the film succeeds somewhat in its depiction of the dockworker’s life, it is entertainment, a love story. What Kazan needed to do, and what he did do, and brilliantly, was to create spontaneity and the illusion of reality.   
  
Although Kazan had been required to hire locals for the films extra, he probably would have done it anyway since they had “the look” he needed. Another reason he had to hire so many locals, 500 in all, was that the winter of 1952 happened to be one of New York’s coldest in years and professional New York actors weren’t interested in a trip out of the city to work in the freezing winds of Hoboken.   
  
The weather was wet, bitter cold, overcast and gray and in several scenes, the metal barrels that the crew used to warm themselves can be seen in several shots throughout the final edit of the film. Breath is visible on screen, a detail Kazan loved and spoke of often because it suggested the brutal lives of the Dockworkers against both corrupt union officials and the elements. With so many natural elements, the actors were free to focus entirely on their character’s emotions. Making conditions worse was the fact that most of the film was shot at night which few people who watch the film ever notice, a tribute to cinematographer Boris Kaufman’s brilliance behind the camera.   
  
Of course, the weather, as a part of the film, could be a double-edged sword. Hoboken offers one of the best skyline views of New York in the entire tri-state area and Kazan wanted to shoot it from Hoboken's view... distant, cold and foggy... the opposite of the picture postcard image of the Big Apple that most Americans knew.   
  
It was Kaufman who improvised the filming of the now infamous “I coulda been a contender” scene, which remains one of the most famous scenes in the history of the American cinema. It is also one of the simplest: two brothers, talking in the back seat of a cab. While the scene is powerful on its own, it is also the pivotal emotional point in the film, releasing all the conflict that precedes it, the vocalization of all that is pent up between the two brothers throughout their lives. Terry pours out everything that haunts him, motivates him and causes the apprehension and self-doubt in his life. It is the scene of scenes, arguably, the most triumphant expression of failure in American movies.   
  
Kazan had requested the scene be done in an actual taxicab while it was driven through Manhattan traffic in the late evening rush hour. The films colorful and controversial producer, Sam Spiegel thought that too expensive, and again without first conferring with Kazan, he redirected Kaufman to shoot the scene inside a studio, where, instead of a taxicab, he somehow found the shell of a taxicab. Actually, it was only half of the shell. Because of that, in the final cut, the cabs driver, played by the talented actor Nehemiah Persoff, is actually sitting on a wooden stool supported by phone books.   
  
When Kazan found out about the scene, he angrily confronted Spiegel and Spiegel, ever the salesman, draped his arms around the director and cooed, “Darling, you’re a genius! You can fix it, you are brilliant! You can fix anything! This is nothing!”   
  
Frustrated and angry, Kazan then asked for a projection unit that would show traffic through the cabs window. Again, Spiegel cut costs and no projection unit arrived. Desperate, Boris Kaufman hammered Venetian blinds across the cab shells rear window. A crew was brought in to shake the fake cab to make it look like it was rolling through traffic while flashlights waved across the blinds gave the illusion of passing cars.   
  
Kaufman also captured the degradation of the “shape up” scene from camera positioning. When Big Mac, the dock supervisor and one of Johnny Friendly’s gang, blows his whistle to call the workers to shape up, Kaufman’s camera is behind Big Mac’s enormous figure, obscuring the longshoremen, insuring the viewer has no doubt of Big Mac’s ultimate importance on the docks. He has the power and the position on the docks and the workers have none.   
  
For the following scene, the scramble for the work-tags, Kaufman brings the camera low to the ground, capturing desperate facial expressions; all of the characters movement is downward towards hell itself. Kaufman used the downward position again later in the film after the fight scene and the deposed Johnny Friendly is pushed into the water from the docks, into the depths of hell, as it were. This act balances Friendly’s murder of Joey Doyle, who is pushed from a rooftop. Clever scripting allows a second balance; Joey Doyle’s father pushes Friendly into the water   
  
In the scene where Edie Doyle joins the fray to get a work chit for her father, Kaufman shot her within the chaos of the fray, emphasizing the desperation, confusion and brutality of the life of an average dockworker and their family.   
Later, in the bar scene, when Terry pours out his feeling for Edie, she turns the conversation to conscience. At that point, Kaufman, shoots an angelic close up of her face in the upper right hand corner of the screen, lowering Terry to the center of the screen, a guardian angel dangling slightly above him.   
  
One of the better moments of camera styling in the film, in this case taking precedence over acting and scripting, is the fantastic scene where Terry confesses his role in Joey Doyle’s murder to Edie. The viewer doesn’t hear the confession or Edie response because Kaufman, in a wide shot, allowed it to be drowned out by the scream of a whistle from a nearby ship, in effect, drowned out by the waterfront as was the life of Joey Doyle. The viewer hears one of two words but the scene is impressionistic, relying on the depth of the actors reactions to the words, the acting accentuated by the sounding of a pounding press machine somewhere in the background. Edie leaves Terry alone on a hell like pile of black rocks, a flame of fire shooting into the sky in the background. Foreshadowing is also sprinkled liberally in the film, all of done without dialogue and left to Kaufman’s camera work.   
  
The entire film is shot in a smooth black and white, since, originally, there had been a hope that Darryl Zanuck, whom Kazan wanted to finance the film, would envision another Grapes of Wrath, one of the most successful films Hollywood had ever produced.   
  
A secondary reason for using black and white was for its realism and symbolism of social class and because in the early 1950s, Italian neo-realism had began to dictate an expectation that black and white was somehow more appropriate for social realism than color was. It was effective for all of those reasons, but it was also cost effective.   
  
Oddly, movie-goers today view black and white as too realistic, which was the mood that Kaufman wanted. He also preferred black and white to color because he believed it better brought across the concept that the director and screenwriter had in mind. Black and white also gave Kaufman wider exposure latitude, and the ability to work in unprepared locations where he frequently used long shot, deep focus photography that situated the workmen versus the harbor.   
  
Throughout the film, Kaufman uses naturalistic setting to accomplish the films view, low angles are an example. Kaufman used low angle versus high angle shots of the various characters. Terry Malloy, as an example, is never shot against an open sky until he makes the decision to challenge Johnny Friendly. After that, he is joined with Father Barry against the sky whenever he attempts to inspire workers to make spiritual choices.   
  
The garish lighting in the back alley when Terry discovers his murdered brother effectively expresses the good/evil polarity of Terry’s situation at that point in the narrative and the scene prior to that, when Terry and Edie are almost run down by a truck has a film noir lighting scheme.   
  
The gangsters and their world are depicted with high contrast, low-key photography, again reminiscent of film noir style. Kazan and Kaufman used suggestive framing when Malden as Father Barry, is lifted from the cargo hold with Kayo Duggan’s corpse, above the men, towards heaven as if Duggan is reward for his testimony and Barry’s reward for his sermon, are to be brought into heaven. In reality, it was the only way out of the cargo hold, the exit door to the hold was too narrow to lift the body through.   
  
Kaufman preferred early morning and late afternoon shooting. It gave him natural light sources such as soft shadows and dimly lit objects would appear better the black and white hues in the film. Clear days were better for Kaufman to create the films distant shots because the natural light and distance would smooth over the harsher edges of the object, but clear days were far and few between during the short time that the crew was in Hoboken. Conversely, Kaufman preferred cloudy days to shoot the actors close up, when the defused lighting would better bring across the actor’s features.   
  
Space is intruded upon by fog and steam engulfs the streets and set the tone for the characters state of mind. Kaufman’s Hoboken sees Manhattan across the river as almost a golden city far beyond the reach of these desperate longshoremen who existed in near poverty and filth. As a result, almost all of Kaufman’s distant shots are of an open space, and usually aerial, from the rooftop of Terry’s apartment house. Those shots, always leaving a romantic image, suggest escape if only temporary, from the problems on the dirty streets below.   
  
But Kazan stressed actors-on-screen over camera work. He wanted the actors work to be the center of the film, not Kaufman’s camera angles. As a result, while there is some wonderful camera work by Kaufman, intense close up’s or dramatic long shots are rare.   
  
The most frequent shot in the film are two-shot angles, meaning two actors in one shot at midrange or in wider shots to show the character’s positioning which Kazan used to show the dynamics of the waterfront hierarchy. Gang leader Johnny Friendly is usually shown alone with his men in the background. As the film progresses, Terry Malloy, who is at first shot close to Friendly and his men, is gradually repositioned, starting with his condemnation to the cargo holds by Friendly for missing Kayo Duggan’s testimony, between the Friendly gang and the longshoremen.   
  
Working closely with Kaufman was the films Art and Set Director, Canadian Richard Day, who had began his film career in 1918 under the director Erich von Stroheim and would win, in the total of his career, seven Oscars for art direction and set design. In Day-Kaufman’s locations in Hoboken, the city is filmed as a place confined in fences and walls and as a result, the charters are confined. Their city is a dingy, dangerous place filled with threatening alleyways, crowded spaces and lights that pierce and blind the cast and the viewer.   
  
When the Oscars nominations for 1954 were announced, On the Waterfront was named for eight awards in total. Among them was Best Black and White Cinematography, which went to Kaufman (Best color went to Milton Krasner for "Three Coins in the Fountain")

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